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AUTHOR Tesch, Renata
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ABSTRACT

Phenomenological research is defined and discussed in terms of its purpose and procedures. Phenomenology deals with subjective consciousness. Phenomenological research probes into the human experience to illuminate the complexity of individual perception. It is aimed at interpretive understanding. The general design for research consists of three phases. These include tentative conceptualization and general exploring of dimensions, filling in or checking leads, and confirmation of prototypal description. The content of phenomenological research consists of three types of questions. These include basic inner processes experienced by everyone at some point in life; experiences believed to be important sociological or psychological phenomena of our time; and changes or transitions that are very common or of special importance. Phenomenological research is valuable to empathetic understanding. It may also be of great value to educators and other professionals involved with children. (DWH)

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDIES:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEIR NATURE AND PROCEDURES

by RENATA TESCH

TM 840 298

Introduction

It is easy to define phenomenological research in a general sense as descriptive research that deals with inner experiences of individuals, i.e. with the way people give meaning to their life-world. It is very difficult to become specific about a definition of phenomenological research.

Descriptive research, except when the description is expressed solely in numbers, uses qualitative data. Many scholars today are becoming aware of the value of such "soft" data, and efforts are made in various scholarly communities to devise ways in which information that cannot be captured in numbers can be translated into knowledge. One of the fields from which the educational researcher can learn is anthropology, and we all have become quite familiar with educational ethnography. Another source that has proved to be fruitful for social science investigations is a branch of philosophy that developed around the beginning of this century in Austria/Germany, and later in France, that is called phenomenology.

Although one person's name is often associated with the origin of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, it would be quite impossible to merely return to his work and derive a definition of phenomenological research from the ideas he produced. Phenomenology as a philosophy has undergone refinement, critique, expansion, association with other branches of philosophy, infusion of new ideas, and re-interpretation. Researchers today draw on different schools of thought within phenomenology, or on

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thoughts on the fringes of phenomenological thinking. Thus, when I refer to phenomenological studies in this talk, I would like you to be aware that the authors of these studies might have called them phenomenological, but they might also have called them existential-phenomenological, hermeneutic, life-world description, reflective interpretation, social phenomenology, or perhaps educational criticism.

Behind each of these terms, as well as behind the term phenomenology itself, stand extensive theoretical considerations that are intriguing to discuss. However, this paper is not the place for making intricate theoretical distinctions. (I will be glad to furnish you with a bibliography for your own exploration, if that is of interest to you.) My goal today is to take the term phenomenology in its broadest sense and to focus on questions of method and educationsal value.

The Purpose of Phenomenological Research

Instead of providing you with a specific definition of phenomenological research in one crisp and neat sentence--which I feel would be too confining for my context--I will try to familiarize you with phenomenological research by describing its purpose and procedures. It will also be helpful to consider what distinguishes phenomenological research from ethnography.

Phenomenology and ethnography are alike in that they describe not external events, but subjective experience. Both are aimed at interpretive understanding. They are different in that ethnography seeks to depict a culture (taken in the wider sense that Spradley applies: "the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior"[1]), while the focus of phenomenological research is on individual experience which does not necessarily need a social context to be meaningful to the individual. The experience of anger, or the experience of intimacy might be such topics. Phenomenology deals with "subjective consciousness" as it "makes sense of things"[2]. Where ethnography would describe, say, the culture of an integrated classroom of Mexican-American and White American children, phenomenological research would explore what it is like to be a White or Mexican child in an integrated classroom.

Why would an educator want to know what the experience of being a Mexican-American child in an integrated classroom is like? Why would we want to know what any experience of any person is like? Is such information knowledge in the scholarly sense? Isn't scholarly knowledge only that knowledge that is generalizable? Please consider with me for a minute the limitations of generalization.

Generalizations give us certain "laws", "rules", or "explanations". When we know these rules or explanations, we can use them as guidelines for our actions. If you are an educator, it is of value to know the relationship between achievement and time on task, for instance. If you are a group leader, you will want to know the rules that govern the interactional dynamics within your group; if you are a therapist, the connection between personality type and criminal behavior will be important to you. These kinds of information provide the professional with some basic knowledge. Generalizations, however, are severely limited: they apply only to the **average** case. Even if the patient in front of you might be "out of touch" because he has not had sufficient body contact as a child, he might experience a therapist's touch quite differently from his neighbor, or than he might tomorrow. Group standards are known to influence a group member's decision, but a particular group member might experience such standards as pressure, even oppression, while another finds them helpful to decision-making.

Human beings are individuals with very different histories and personalities. Professionals who work with people need more than knowledge of rules and regularities. They need the empathy and insight that comes from knowing in which ways and how differently each person may experience a certain situation or event. Unless we study the range of meanings that a person may attach to a situation or event, we do not have a framework for the interpretation of the person's behavior, and therefore no basis for developing true empathy. A counselor who sees a child from a divorced home expecting that the child is "in trouble" and who is without knowledge of the range of adaptive reactions which might allow this particular child to be quite balanced emotionally, will do more harm than good. A therapist who wishes to help a couple with intimacy problems would be ineffective unless he is familiar with the various ways in which his troubled clients may interprete these experiences.

I do not agree with those phenomenological researchers who claim that the phenomenological process is the only way to study human beings. I do feel, however, that it is one imperative way that must not be omitted from the research spectrum. **Phenomenological research accumulates knowledge on the range of the individual, the specific, the unique. Its purpose is to probe into the richness of the human experience and to illuminate the complexity of individual perception and action against the background of our knowledge of the general laws or regularities in human nature.**

Phenomenological Research Procedures

Given this purpose, how does one go about acquiring knowledge of the range of individual experience? There are several principles that govern phenomenological research; they are derived from phenomenological philosophy. I will mention two of them. Number one is to explore "the things in themselves", as Husserl says. The researcher approaches the research topic, i.e. the particular phenomenon under consideration, without any preconceived notions. This means: being aware of one's own presuppositions, and trying to not permit them to influence one's exploration. One does not accept a theoretical framework first, and then tests the notion whether or not the phenomenon fits that framework. The purpose is to proceed with the highest degree of open-mindedness of which one is capable, to let "the things speak for themselves".

The next principle that derives from phenomenological premises is to treat the person, who has the experience one is interested in, as the expert in that experience. Subjects are not "manipulated". Most phenomenological researchers don't even speak of "informants" as we do in ethnography. The people who give us the information are "participants" in our endeavor to describe the phenomenon as clearly and comprehensively as possible; in a sense they are our co-researchers.

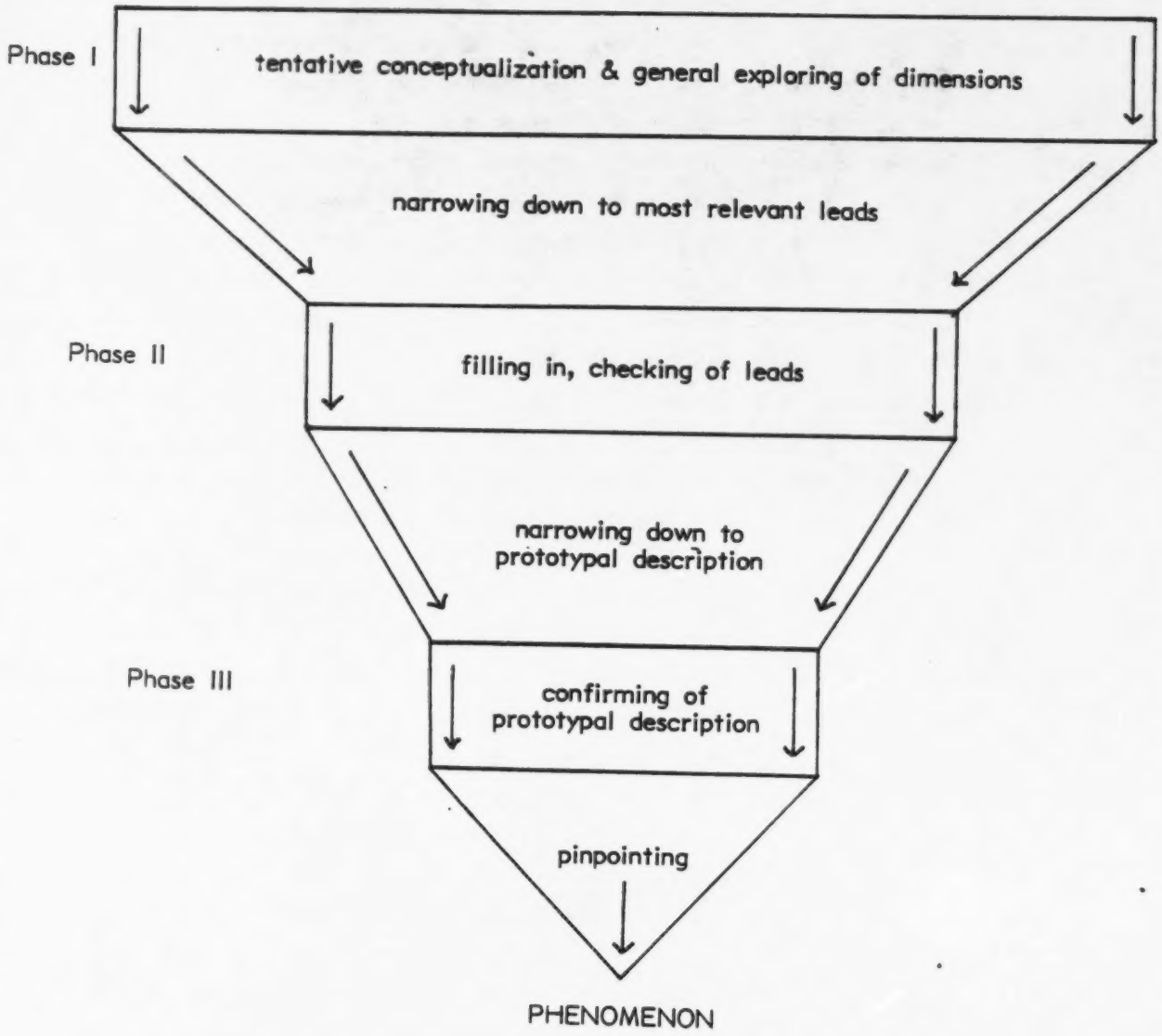
This last principle is one that, to a certain extent, determines the methods used in phenomenological research. We ask our study participants to share their experiences with us, i.e. we interview them. A phenomenological interview is, however, not

merely a question-and-answer exercise; it is an experience of immersion in the phenomenon, of intense reflection. I like the description of a phenomenological interview as "dialogic introspection". Although most prevalent, the interview is by no means the only way to gather phenomenological data. In the studies I am familiar with, phenomenological researchers have shown a delightful display of creativity. Researchers have asked their participants to use diaries or write memoirs tracing a certain theme in their lifes. They have observed them and studied the environment that they had created for themselves. Researchers have interviewed significant others, colleagues, teachers, caretakers, or friends of their participants. They have created specific tasks for them at which they could be observed, or the participants were observed in natural interactions with others, including their occupations and actions during an entire day or weekend. Some researchers have even made use of conventional diagnostic instruments, although they rarely execute a statistical analysis. And last, but not least, (in fact, often as the first source of information), researchers have explored their own experiences.

The usual number of participants in a phenomenological study is between 10 and 15 persons, depending on the phenomenon to be researched; sometimes researchers work with only 6, or as many as 25 people. When the researcher is studying a topic as potentially disturbing as being a cancer patient or a handicapped child, where the first sessions with the participant have to be used to establish trust and to gradually approach the unpleasant topic, or where the reflection needs to probe into the difficult realm of semi-awareness, the researcher cannot possibly deal with more than a few persons. In studies that have the character of phenomenological ethnography, quite a large number of participants may be included.

Although studies are conducted in a variety of ways, I have observed a trend towards a certain pattern in the process along which phenomenological studies proceed. This structure might not always be made explicit, but it seems that researchers need to go through certain phases in order to achieve their goals. The most noteworthy characteristic of this process is that, unlike traditional researchers, the phenomenological researcher remains in much longer contact with "the field". In fact, there seems to be a back-and-forth movement between a phase of thinking and analyzing, and a phase of data gathering. Basically there seem to be three phases:

GENERAL DESIGN FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH



I am not saying that every phenomenological study has exactly these three phases. The chart represents a model, i.e. an abstracted and therefore idealized version of the actual process that occurs. Though we may be able to distinguish conceptually between the three phases, the researcher will probably find the transitions blurred. In some studies the first and second phases, for instance, might overlap almost entirely, in other studies the researcher might go back and forth between the field and her desk four or five times. Thus, there is no rigid structure. However, without an awareness of the objectives of each step that is taken, the investigation is not a scholarly activity, but becomes an impressionistic, personal adventure. Not all phenomenological researchers would agree that phenomenological research can be systematic without violation of its basic principles. But among those studies that I have seen the ones who are most powerful are the ones that, although not rigidly planned, are carried out with a great deal of concern for purposefulness and order. In that sense, they are systematic.

How can one judge the power of a phenomenological study, i.e. its credibility and legitimacy? I have compiled a list of **actions and omissions that tend to weaken phenomenological studies.** This list is not exhaustive.

*** The researcher does not make an effort to become aware of her own presuppositions, or she does not make them known to the reader.

*** The researcher does not incorporate a process of self-monitoring or "disciplined subjectivity".

*** The researcher does not adequately consider the range of data gathering procedure available to her; she does not "triangulate".

*** The researchers deals with too few participants, possibly only one case, preventing herself from being able to establish a "pattern", if one exists.

*** The researcher does not adequately describe her participants, thus severely limiting the applicability of her findings.

*** The researcher does not go back and forth between phases of data gathering

and phases of analysis, thus not exhausting her data sources, or not seeking confirmation from her participants.

*** The researcher does not describe her data gathering procedures with sufficient specificity to allow the reader a critical judgment on its adequacy.

*** The researcher does not describe her data analysis procedure with sufficient specificity to allow her reader a judgment on whether the process she used to discern common themes or patterns was logically conclusive.

*** The researcher does not include sufficient "raw data" or "primary material" to give the reader a flavor of her participants' experience.

*** The researcher does not use existing theory to enlighten her understanding, or to make a contribution to her scholarly field of investigation by showing how her findings do or do not fit into the existing mode of thinking.

Content of Phenomenological Research

So far I have talked about the purpose and process of phenomenological research. I would like to conclude with a consideration of the content. What kinds of questions do phenomenological researchers ask? In the very beginning, phenomenologists were mostly interested in perception, like seeing, hearing, touching. Today, I believe, we can distinguish between three types of questions:

1. Questions about **basic inner processes** we believe everyone experiences at least at some time in one's life. Researchers have explored phenomenologically experiences like: Intimacy, privacy, love, love lost, shame, ambivalence, enchantment, courage, social support, self-understanding, understanding another person, the experience of time, or of being blocked or unblocked in creativity.

2. Questions about **experiences believed to be important sociological or psychological phenomena** of our time, or typical of large segments of our population,

such as: Being a cancer patient, being an adolescent drug abuser, being a nurse, a blue-collar working woman, remaining childless, being an alcoholic, being hospitalized for surgery, growing old in Appalachia.

3. Questions about **changes or transitions that are either very common or of special importance** at this time: Transition to motherhood, changing one's male role behavior, becoming empowered as a citizen, taking on a positive humorous attitude towards life, returning home after imprisonment, being an "out-of-touch" schizophrenic who for the first time experiences touching and massaging.

The three categories are distinguished from each other only to establish some conceptual order. They don't by any means describe the entire field of options for phenomenological studies; they are merely an organizing device that pulls together the most common kinds of phenomenological questions. Phenomenological researchers have also tackled unusual topics like the creation of a dance, landscape as experience, swearing, or having an affair as a happily married woman.

Although not many phenomenological studies have yet been done in the educational/pedagogical realm, I am aware that the following **topics** have been **explored:**

- the meaning of children in the life of adults.
- being an "institutionalized" child, i.e. a child in a day-care center
- being a child whose parents divorced
- the experience of time for children
- children's experience of touch
- the experience of playing hide and seek
- coming to class unprepared
- being a lower class Black student
- being an adolescent substance abuser
- communicating with persons who have a speech handicap
- experiencing animals
- children's imaginations of peace and war
- children's conceptions of "evidence"
- being a teacher

- being a small-town teacher
- being an ethnic minority teacher (Japanese)
- becoming a teacher
- translating a national plan into curriculum implementation
- being a principal
- being an adult graduate student in an external degree program

I asked educators who are familiar with phenomenological research what they felt are important **topics that need to be investigated,** and together with my own thoughts, they are presented in the following list:

- being a handicapped student
- being a disruptive student
- being a "latchkey" child (alone when coming home from school)
- being a child of an alcoholic parent
- having dyslexia
- being learning disabled
- having severe behavior problems
- being an ethnic minority student
- being a child computer expert
- being addicted to TV
- being a video game addict
- being a home computer addict
- feeling stupid
- feeling "the teacher hates me"
- the meaning of schooling
- the meaning of play
- the life-world of children
- children's perception of nuclear war, of stress, of pain, of illness/health, of death and dying
- depression among college freshmen
- being a minority student at a white college
- being a pregnant teenager

- adolescent stress
- being an unemployed youth
- being a high school student who works after school
- being a teenage alcolholic
- being a Black youth searching for a job
- the experience of learning
- the experience of teaching
- the experience of parenting
- being a parent or teacher of "computer wizards"
- teacher stress
- being a beginning teacher
- being "in authority" in an educational setting
- being a woman manager
- being a teacher on strike
- the teacher's perception of her investment in the educational process of a given school
- experiencing the bargaining process as a teacher, as an administrator
- the phenomenology of educational language.

You might ask: Why would we want to investigate all these topics? I mentioned earlier the value of phenomenological research for empathetic understanding, for being aware of the range of experiences an individual may have. But phenomenological studies may also help us to make this world a better place for children and youth. Loren Barritt's and Ton Beekman's study on "hide and seek", for instance, helps us to see that our modern city designs make this non-competitive, ever-enticing game an "endangered species"[3]. Valerie Pokanow Suransky's study on children in daycare centers advises us to "disaffiliate pre-school from the schooling process" and instead to ground it in the "authentic existence of the child", which is "playhood".[4] From a study done with urban Black students, Carlton Brown was able to provide specific recommendations for improvement of these students' situation in our urban schools.[5]

I hope to have shown the value of phenomenology to education. Although we are still

in a stage of methodological exploration, I believe that phenomenological research has become refined and credible enough to warrant our attention as an important way of "understanding the lifes of those for whom we bear pedagogic responsibility".6

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4 Valerie Polakow Suransky **The Erosion of Childhood: A Social-Phenomenological Study of Early Institutionalization.** Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1977, p.306

5 **Education USA,** August 16, 1982, p.389: Urban Black Students Mistrust School Climate

6 Martinus Jan Langeveld Reflections on Phenomenology and Pedagogy. **Phenomenology + Pedagogy,** 1983, 1 (1), 7